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# Old Fort Atkinson

Bruce E. Mahan

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## Old Fort Atkinson

On a high bluff overlooking the beautiful valley of the Turkey River in northeastern Iowa, the remains of historic old Fort Atkinson stand as a monument to the days when the Winnebago Indians lived on the Neutral Ground. Below, as far as the eye can see, stretch the fields and meadows of modern farms, near by winds the lazily flowing water of the Turkey River, while to the south the little town of Fort Atkinson perpetuates the name of the frontier post.

For almost a decade, from 1840-1848, Fort Atkinson protected the Winnebago from the incursions of their hostile neighbors — the Sioux on the north, the Sac and Fox on the south. At the same time the soldiers prevented the Winnebago from trespassing and from wandering beyond the limits of their reservation, while they also stopped the whites, eager for land, from settling upon the Indian domain. With the removal of the Winnebago to Minnesota in 1848, the need of Fort Atkinson as a military post



ceased and, abandoned by the government, it passed into the limbo of obsolete frontier institutions. Eighty years after its erection, the friends of the old fort succeeded in bringing it out of its period of obscurity by purchasing the site and the dilapidated buildings from private owners and turning the property over to the State for a park.

Fort Atkinson was built to meet an emergency. As early as 1832 the Winnebago Indians had surrendered their rights to their land south and east of the Wisconsin River and had agreed to take in exchange certain annuities plus the Neutral Ground in the Iowa country. However, they showed little inclination to move west of the Mississippi and with the exception of a few who had crossed the river, they continued to reside in Wisconsin, causing the white settlers considerable annoyance and dissatisfaction. In 1837 a delegation of Winnebago chiefs in a conference at Washington agreed to remove to a site on Turkey River within two years, but a combination of causes led them to neglect their promises. Their love for their home in Wisconsin, a passionate attraction for the shores of the Father of Waters, and a reluctance to leave the whiskey venders of their old haunts retarded their migration. Moreover, a genuine fear of attacks from the Sac and Fox and the Sioux held them back. By the autumn of 1839 part of the Winnebago had crossed to the Iowa side but the majority still clung to their homes east of the Mississippi.



Finally, in March, 1840, the Senate of the United States, impatient at the delay, passed resolutions asking the Secretary of War to explain why the Winnebago had not been removed to the home in Iowa Territory. He replied that the delay had been caused in part by an unsuccessful attempt to induce the Indians to move to the country southwest of the Missouri River, but added that Brigadier General Henry Atkinson had already received orders to remove the Winnebago to the Neutral Ground and was engaged in that task. General Atkinson, in spite of the opposition of the Indians, succeeded in accomplishing the removal peaceably during the spring of the year 1840.

To reassure the Winnebago who were apprehensive and restless in the new land between their ancient enemies, and to prevent their straggling back to their old haunts, Captain Isaac Lynde with Company F of the Fifth Infantry, a detachment of eighty-two officers and enlisted men, was sent from Fort Crawford into the Neutral Ground. They marched to a point on the Turkey River in what is now Winneshiek County, Iowa, a few miles north of the site selected for the agency house and mission school. Here they went into camp May 31, 1840, naming the place "Camp Atkinson" in honor of the department commander.

Two days later, mechanics about fifty in number, who had come from Prairie du Chien under the escort of Company F, began the erection of barracks



and quarters under the direction of James Tapper, foreman. Government teamsters hauled part of the material used in the construction of the buildings from the vicinity of Fort Crawford over the route later known as the old military trail. Throughout the summer and autumn of 1840, horses, oxen, and mules stamped their way over the fifty miles of prairie drawing heavy loads of pine lumber, nails and other supplies. A sawmill near the site selected for the mission turned out walnut lumber for interior use while blocks of limestone were quarried in the immediate vicinity of the fort.

Carpenters and masons completed quarters for the accommodation of Captain Lynde's company during the summer. At the same time other workmen erected a storehouse near the landing on the west bank of the Mississippi opposite Fort Crawford for the storage of supplies destined for the post on Turkey River.

Autumn arrived with its wondrous foliage and work on the buildings continued. Late that season a teamster, Howard by name, set out with a load of supplies from the Mississippi landing and stopped for the night at Joel Post's tavern, now the site of Postville, half-way on his journey. A heavy snowfall the next day delayed the trip. When Howard departed on the last lap of the journey on the following morning the temperature had dropped and the air became bitterly cold. A party, following the trail a day later, came upon the loaded wagon in the



road, but the team and driver were gone. Following the tracks in the snow they came upon the body of the unfortunate teamster frozen stiff.

Month by month the stone walls took shape, and skilled workmen fitted joists and rafters and laid the floors. During the next spring when the buildings began to assume the appearance of a fortification the post received the more dignified name of Fort Atkinson.

In the meantime, rumors of a warlike attitude on the part of the Sac and Fox Indians led Governor Henry Dodge of Wisconsin Territory to urge the sending of a mounted force to the Neutral Ground to protect the Winnebago and to prevent their return to Wisconsin. To meet the situation General Atkinson ordered troops to march from Fort Crawford into the region of the Red Cedar and Turkey rivers until it was expedient to send mounted troops. He felt that it would be unwise to send the dragoons before the middle of May as there would be no barracks nor stables for their accommodation nor forage for their horses.

At once the mechanics at Fort Atkinson began to erect additional barracks and to build stables. On June 24, 1841, Captain Edwin V. Sumner arrived with Company B of the First United States Dragoons and joined the garrison, making the force about one hundred and sixty strong, and for six years Fort Atkinson continued to be a two company post. In the fall Company K of the First Infantry



with Captain J. J. Abercrombie in command replaced Captain Lynde's company.

When work on the fort was completed during the next year, 1842, four long rectangular barracks, two of stone and two of logs hewn flat, enclosed a square parade and drill ground of more than an acre. These buildings were two stories high and twenty feet from the ground to the eaves, each having an upper porch along its entire length, with the one on the officers' quarters screened in with movable wooden blinds. Commissioned officers and their families occupied one of the stone barracks; non-coms and their families lived in one of hewn logs; while the private soldiers used the other two. In one of the latter, the stone building, the lower part was used as a hospital while in the other, the upstairs section was fitted up with bunks, the lower portion divided into several living rooms and one large room which was equipped with benches, a platform, and pulpit to be used as a chapel and school.

At one end of the parade ground a tall flag-staff towered above the works. A gunhouse with thick stone walls and peaked roof occupied the southwest corner of the works, which with its counterpart in the northeast corner guarded the approaches to the four sides of the stockade. In the southeast corner stood the stone magazine or powder-house while in the opposite corner was located the quartermaster's store-house adjoined by the sutler's store, with the guardhouse nearby. A picket fence of squared logs



twelve feet high with loop holes at intervals of four feet enclosed the buildings and with the two block-houses made a rectangular fort of formidable appearance.

North of the fort and across a street were located the bakery, the blacksmith shop, and carpenter shops. The stables were some 40 feet wide and 300 feet long running in a north and south direction. Beginning near the powder-house and extending nearly the entire length of one side of the stockade was the sentinel's beat with its platform about three feet below the sharpened tips of the logs. At one end of the beat a small shelter protected the guard during inclement weather.

To complete the buildings and to build the road from the Mississippi required a total appropriation of about \$90,000, a sum much greater than the circumstances warranted in the opinion of the Quarter Master General of the Army who felt that the pressure of the white population would soon drive the Indians north or south, thus making the fort useless.

While the clink of carpenters' hammers rang out and masons plied their trowels in erecting the buildings, military duty was not neglected. Regularly in the morning the flag was drawn to the top of the tall flag-staff there to flutter until sunset when with solemn ceremony it was lowered and furled for the night. In the gray light of early dawn the trumpeters took their stations and the sharp tones of reveille called the sleepy garrison to the duties of the day.



Roll was called in front of the barracks, quarters were put in order, and the horses fed and watered. Sick call furnished patients for the hospital and gave the post surgeon a chance to prove his skill.

Breakfasts of fried salt pork, bread, and hot black coffee being finished, there followed the tasks of the day. Squads of dragoons in brilliant uniforms sent out to patrol the reservation blocked the way of wily Winnebago braves who stealthily sought to return to the old hunting grounds; details of infantrymen despatched to the agency coöperated with the agent sometimes doing the work on the farm which the Indians neglected at every opportunity. Others assigned to garrison duty walked their beats as sentinels, cleaned and polished arms and accouterments or performed the detested tasks of indoor work. Frequent drills, maneuvers and inspections at which the young lieutenants fresh from West Point perfected their commands in marchings, manual of arms, and target practice, made up a part of the daily program. In the early evening, arms were stacked in the arm-racks, horses were fed and bedded for the night, and sentinels posted. Then the garrisons settled down to rest, to smoke, to play cards, to sing, to swap yarns or argue till tattoo sounded, when with the candles' feeble glow snuffed out, the quiet darkness of the prairie night enveloped the sleeping soldiers and their families.

Patrol duty often took the mounted company on long tours. Twice during 1842 requisitions from



Governor Chambers of Iowa Territory caused Captain Sumner and his dragoons to spend several weeks in the saddle driving out squatters and other intruders from the lands of the Sac and Fox to the south. Although heavy rains often pelted the marching column, streams had to be forded, and sodden blankets and equipment produced many a cheerless night, nevertheless the troopers welcomed the chance to get away from garrison life. The luckless adventurer, too, who had settled unlawfully upon the Indian domain could testify to the energy of the dragoons as he looked back upon his blazing cabin, his fences destroyed, and his crops trampled under hoof.

Their return to Fort Atkinson after such a trip afforded a chance for them to enliven the monotony of garrison life by recounting to an interested circle of infantrymen lurid tales of their trips by day and their camps at night. Great was the excitement, too, at the fort when in August, 1842, Captain James Allen with forty-four dragoons arrived after a long trip overland from Fort Leavenworth. During their short visit at the post friendships were formed which lasted for years for the paths of the two companies later crossed and recrossed. Soon Captain Allen and his men were on their way to the Sac and Fox Agency on the River Des Moines where they established the temporary post called Fort Sanford.

Again in the fall of 1844 considerable interest was aroused at the fort over the arrival of Reverend



J. L. Elliot who came to fill the double rôle of chaplain and schoolmaster. In the same room he exhorted the men on Sundays to resist the temptations of their isolated position, and during the week instructed the sons and daughters of officers and men — twenty to twenty-five pupils — in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Occasionally he exchanged pulpits with Reverend David Lowry who supervised the Winnebago mission and school to the south.

Although Captain Sumner with his dragoons prevented effectually the smuggling of liquor into the reservation he was unable to stop the Indians from visiting the whiskey shops set up just outside the boundary. Two of these known as "Sodom" and "Gomorrah" did a thriving business. In spite of the fact that hundreds of Indians joined the sub-agent's temperance society, they soon forgot their pledge and were drinking as heavily as before. After the Indians received their annuities at the agency, drunken frolics which sometimes resulted in bloodshed and murders doubled the work of the soldiers until the period of dissipation ended. Officers, too, found it difficult after a pay day at the post to prevent the soldiers from yielding to the allurements of "Whiskey Grove", a popular resort a few miles away.

To the dragoons, perhaps, the summer trip in 1845 to the northern part of the Territory of Iowa into what is now Minnesota was the outstanding event of their stay at Fort Atkinson. Filing out from the



gate of the fort on June 3, they headed northwest and ten days later came in contact with Captain Allen's company which had travelled from Fort Des Moines to take part in the trip. June rains and floods delayed the march so that the cavalcade did not reach Traverse des Sioux, the objective of the trip, till June 22. About the glowing embers of the campfire in the evenings troopers recounted their adventures and exchanged experiences of the three years that had elapsed since the companies had met at Fort Atkinson.

At the camp — a double row of tents for the men with the horses picketed in the space between, the tents of the officers forming a cross street at one end — Sumner and Allen held conferences with the Indians. They arrested certain offenders and warned a band of half-breeds from Canada that they were trespassing on the territory of the United States. Separating at Traverse des Sioux, on August 11, the two companies set out on the return march. By steady riding Captain Sumner's company accomplished the journey in eight days, but the dragoons rode back into Fort Atkinson with uniforms badly worn, horses jaded, and the men weary from the long hard trip.

When war with Mexico became inevitable, it was apparent to government authorities that the regiments of the regular army should be assembled and the posts occupied by their separate companies should either be abandoned or reoccupied by volun-



teer organizations. Accordingly the regulars were retained at Fort Snelling and at Fort Leavenworth, Fort Des Moines was promptly abandoned, and the troops were withdrawn from Fort Crawford and Fort Atkinson for service in Mexico. Both the governor of Wisconsin and the governor of Iowa were called upon to raise volunteers to man these forts.

To James M. Morgan with a commission as captain, from Governor Clarke, fell the task of enlisting a company for service at Fort Atkinson. He had been editor and part owner of the *Burlington Gazette* and he experienced little difficulty in securing recruits. On July 8, 1846, fifty-four men had enrolled at Burlington, twenty-two of whom had come from down the river and from the country thereabouts. Six volunteers arrived from Iowa City on July 9, and two days later eight came from Dubuque and Galena. Morgan, a man of slight stature, with hair and beard of so bright an auburn hue that he acquired the sobriquet "Little Red", soon won the respect and affection of his men.

He and his command left Burlington on the steamboat "Belmont", which conveyed them to McGregor's Landing, thence they marched over the military trail to Fort Atkinson. One unfortunate member of the company, William Topp, had fallen overboard on the up-trip and was drowned. At the fort three more men enrolled and on July 15, 1846, the entire company was mustered into the service of the United States for twelve months. In Indian Agent Jona-



than R. Fletcher of Muscatine, Morgan found a former associate of his in the old Territorial militia.

For the assistance of Captain Morgan's Independent Company of Iowa Volunteers it was decided to enlist a mounted company, and to John Parker of Dubuque who was commissioned captain was assigned the duty of enrolling the cavalrymen. His task proved easy in spite of the fact that the members had to furnish their own horses, saddles, and equipment.

The company was mustered into service at Fort Atkinson on September 9, 1846, by Brevet Major Alexander S. Hooe to serve for twelve months unless sooner discharged. At once it became a part of the garrison, furnishing troops for scouting purposes, watching the wanderings of the Winnebago, keeping them within the limits of the reservation, and trying to prevent the smuggling of liquor. Handicapped by want of arms — a few spare muskets from Captain Morgan's company being all the guns they had — they performed their duties with credit. By placing troops on the trail to Sodom, Morgan and Parker captured many a barrel of whiskey.

However, much to the indignation of the officers and men of Parker's Iowa Dragoon Volunteers and against the vigorous protests of Governor Clarke and Augustus C. Dodge, the War Department decided that the service of the troopers could be dispensed with, and accordingly the company was mustered out by Major Hooe on November 5, 1846,



after only sixty-nine days of service. Thus the mounted volunteers, their military zeal dampened by resentment, turned the heads of their war horses homeward, and guided them sullenly back to log cabins or towns there to resume the labors of farm and shop.

The discharge of the company was due, doubtless, largely to the report to the War Department made by Brigadier General George M. Brooke, commander of the Western Division who inspected Fort Atkinson in September, 1846. The nondescript appearance of the raw troops apparently offended his military taste, and seeing no necessity for the maintenance of two companies, he recommended the discharge of the mounted unit since it was the most expensive to maintain. The story is told, however, that a squad of Parker's company was stationed on the military road at a point near the present station of Ridley with orders to prevent the smuggling of liquor. When General Brooke reached this point on his way to Fort Atkinson, the sergeant in charge of the squad insisted on searching his baggage, and confiscated the brandy which he found therein. This so incensed the general that he recommended the dismissal of the company. However, verification of this story is lacking and therefore it must be taken with a grain of salt.

When Morgan's company had served twelve months it was mustered out at Fort Atkinson, and on the same date, July 15, 1847, a new company



formed which came to be known as "Morgan's Company of Iowa Mounted Volunteers. Of the former company all the commissioned and non-commissioned officers and twenty-eight of the privates re-enlisted. As an inducement to join, each private was offered twenty dollars per month, forty-two dollars in advance for clothing, and the promise of 160 acres of land at the end of the year. It was felt that the difficulty of keeping order among the Indians was too great a task for infantry alone, hence the new company was mounted. Furthermore, the plan to remove the Winnebago to a new home in Minnesota was already under way and a cavalry force to act as escort was needed.

When the time came for the removal of the Winnebago, adjustments of the military forces were made to meet the situation. Captain Morgan's mounted company became the escort while a detachment of twenty-five men of Captain Wiram Knowlton's Wisconsin company moved over from Fort Crawford to garrison Fort Atkinson during Morgan's absence.

In June, 1848, the cavalcade set out headed straight north to reach the Mississippi River at Wabasha's Prairie. Between two and three thousand Indians with sixteen hundred ponies, one hundred and sixty-six army wagons loaded down with supplies and belongings of the Red Men, squalling papooses hung in sacks over the backs of ponies, the lumbering cannon and caissons, the Indian Agent and his helpers, the cavalymen heavily armed with



carbine, sword, and revolver made up a slow moving and picturesque caravan. When Wabasha's Prairie was reached a conspiracy on the part of the Indians to resist further progress was frustrated by an overwhelming display of force, for here Morgan who had learned of the plot received reinforcements by the arrival of Captain Seth Eastman with a company of regulars from Fort Snelling and of Captain Knowlton with his company from Fort Crawford.

From this point the Indians were loaded on barges and towed by steamboat to the Falls of St. Anthony where the land journey was resumed. On July 30, 1848, the caravan reached its destination at the mouth of the Watab River, after a journey of 310 miles. Morgan's company stayed to maintain order during the erection of the agency buildings on Long Prairie, then set out on the return trip to Fort Atkinson in September. They rode back to Fort Snelling, took steamboat to McGregor's Landing and thence followed the old trail to Fort Atkinson where they were mustered out of service September 11, 1848.

From September 25, 1848, to February 24, 1849, the fort was garrisoned by Company C, Sixth Infantry, with Captain F. L. Alexander in command. The need for Fort Atkinson having ended with the removal of the Winnebago, the War Department ordered its abandonment on the latter date. The teamsters harnessed the mules for the last time while privates of Company C loaded their supplies on the



army wagons; and, lowering the flag, the company marched out the heavy gate of Fort Atkinson leaving it in charge of a single caretaker, Alexander Faulkner. In the sleeping quarters of the soldiers, tacked to one of the massive black walnut bunks, one of the departing warriors had left a card with the inscription "Farewell to bedbugs".

The property was never again occupied as a fort although for a time it was looked after by Josiah Goddard and then by George Cooney, who were appointed to act as caretakers by the government. When the General Assembly of Iowa learned that Fort Atkinson was to be abandoned, a memorial was presented to Congress asking that the buildings and two sections of land be donated as a site for an agricultural school which would be a branch of the State University. This appeal went unanswered. A similar request in 1851 met the same fate, and again in 1853, when the General Assembly asked Congress to donate the grounds and buildings of the fort for a "normal manual labor and military institute" to be maintained at the expense of the State, the appeal fell on deaf ears. In July, 1853, the government sold the buildings of the fort at public auction for \$3,521.

To convert this historic spot into a State park and to preserve the remains of the post as a reminder of frontier days in the Hawkeye State was urged for twenty years before definite steps were taken to accomplish this worthy project. Finally the proposal to create the park and to preserve and improve



the Old Military Trail from McGregor to Fort Atkinson came to a head during the past two years and both projects are under way.

To a visitor with imagination who makes a trip at this time of the year to the site of Fort Atkinson, and who knows the early history of the spot a vision of the past takes form and substance. The shocks of corn in the fields below the bluff become the tepees of the proud Winnebago while the haze of late Indian summer suggests the smoke of many council fires. Down the last stretch of the old military trail rumbles an army transport heavily laden with barrels of flour and pork, boxes of soap and candles and bags of beans. The teamster guides his four mule team through the gate of the fort and replies to the rude quips of the soldiers with a rare assortment of racy oaths. The thin clear notes of a distant bugle announce the approach of a dragoon patrol, returning from a successful raid upon "Sodom". The belching flame and re-echoing boom of the sunset gun remind the Indian wards of the power of the great White Father at Washington.

The picture fades out as the realities of the present intrude and the dilapidated buildings reproach the visitor with the neglect of years. At last the people of Iowa have awakened to the justice of making this place an historic shrine and a mecca for those who feel that Iowa's landmarks should be preserved.

BRUCE E. MAHAN